**A TV Guide to the Orchestra**

Program notes by Aaron Grad

You know from watching shows and movies how much music helps to set the mood. Sometimes, a composer gets paid to write brand-new music to go along with the video (and you will hear later from the best composer ever to work that way). But a lot of the time, the people creating a show or movie decide to play a piece of music that was written long ago. Many of the pieces you will hear today might sound familiar, because, wherever they first started, they get used over and over again in different shows and movies, and even commercials.

The first piece you’ll hear is something a little different. 80 years ago, across the ocean in England, the government had the idea to make an educational video for kids that would introduce the different instruments and sections of an orchestra. For the music, they hired a young composer who had just gotten very famous after writing his first opera, Benjamin Britten. He decided to take a little bit of music originally written 250 years earlier by another famous opera composer from England, Henry Purcell, and arrange it different ways to show off all the instruments, each introduced by someone speaking onstage—a piece he called *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*. This concert use the same music, but with a new story acted out between the sections.

For about 300 years before movies came along, the most intense way to tell a story for a big audience was through *opera*, where the music kept going the whole time, the characters wore costumes and sang their words instead of speaking them, an entire orchestra was stuffed under the stage to play along, and bright lights and painted backdrops transported you to another place. With all the strong feelings that composers created in operas, it makes sense that many movies and TV shows have borrowed parts of them. Today you will hear examples of opera music composed in Italy (Rossini’s *William Tell* Overture), France (Bizet’s *Habanera* from *Carmen*, an opera actually set in Spain) and Russia (Rimsky-Korsakov’s buzzy *Flight of the Bumblebee* from *Tale of the Tsar Saltan*).

Besides operas, people also went to theaters to see people dance to music—they call it *ballet* in France—or perform plays with music in the background. Khachaturian’s *Saber Dance* came from the ballet *Gayane*, and Grieg’s *In the Hall of the Mountain King* originally went along with a play called *Peer Gynt.*

There are also many pieces of music that tells a story just through the sounds, without any singing or dancing or acting. In these famous examples, composers paint scenes using nothing but notes, making us imagine a raging storm (in “Summer” from Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*), a fierce battle (Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*), or a sunrise (Strauss’ *Also sprach Zarathustra*).

It’s worth remembering, music doesn’t have to tell a specific story to be filled with big feelings. One of the most recognizable and intense pieces ever written for an orchestra was Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and there’s no story behind it at all, just notes coming together in ways that make us curious and excited to follow their path.

After all of these pieces written for other places that keep showing up on our screens, we’ll end with selections from greatest film composer of them all, John Williams, who wrote these unforgettable melodies for the *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* movies, along with many other tunes you might know from *E.T.*, *Jaws*, the *Indiana Jones* moves and so many more. So next time you’re watching something, and you hear an orchestra in the background playing music that makes it more exciting, you can thank all the composers who have been writing these kinds of pieces for centuries!

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